



The Egyptian Expedition 1916-1919: IV. The Monasteries of the Wadi Natrun

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## IV. THE MONASTERIES OF THE WADI NATRUN

DURING the winters of 1910 and 1911, W. J. Palmer-Jones carried out on behalf of the Museum's Egyptian Expedition a complete architectural survey of the existing monasteries in the Wadi Natrun, of which preliminary reports appeared in the BULLETIN at the time.<sup>1</sup> The final publication of this careful and valuable record has hitherto been delayed by the consideration that, without a preliminary study presenting all that can be learned as to the history of the various monuments, the student would be at a loss to classify the material of various periods set before him. Existing studies of the monasteries and their monuments, however, are either purely superficial (and often misleading), or are devoted—as are Strzygowski's articles—to a single object or strictly limited group of objects. It was consequently decided that as complete an examination as possible of the literary notices relating to the monasteries ought to be made, with a view to compiling a history which should make available to the reader all that can be learned as to the date of the monuments and the circumstances which conditioned their production. This task, which was one of some magnitude, was assigned to the present writer. Search had first to be made in all likely sources and documents of the most diverse kinds for the relevant material, and the facts when found had to be digested and suitably combined. The process is now so far advanced that it is possible to present, in the following brief outline, our main deductions as to the architectural history of the monasteries.

The first monk to settle in Wadi Natrun<sup>2</sup> was Macarius the Egyptian, whose retirement to the desert took place in 330 A.D. His original intention was to lead a life of complete solitude; but this was speedily defeated by the rapid gathering of a circle of admirers who forced him to become the chief of a loosely-knit community of the Antonian type. The center

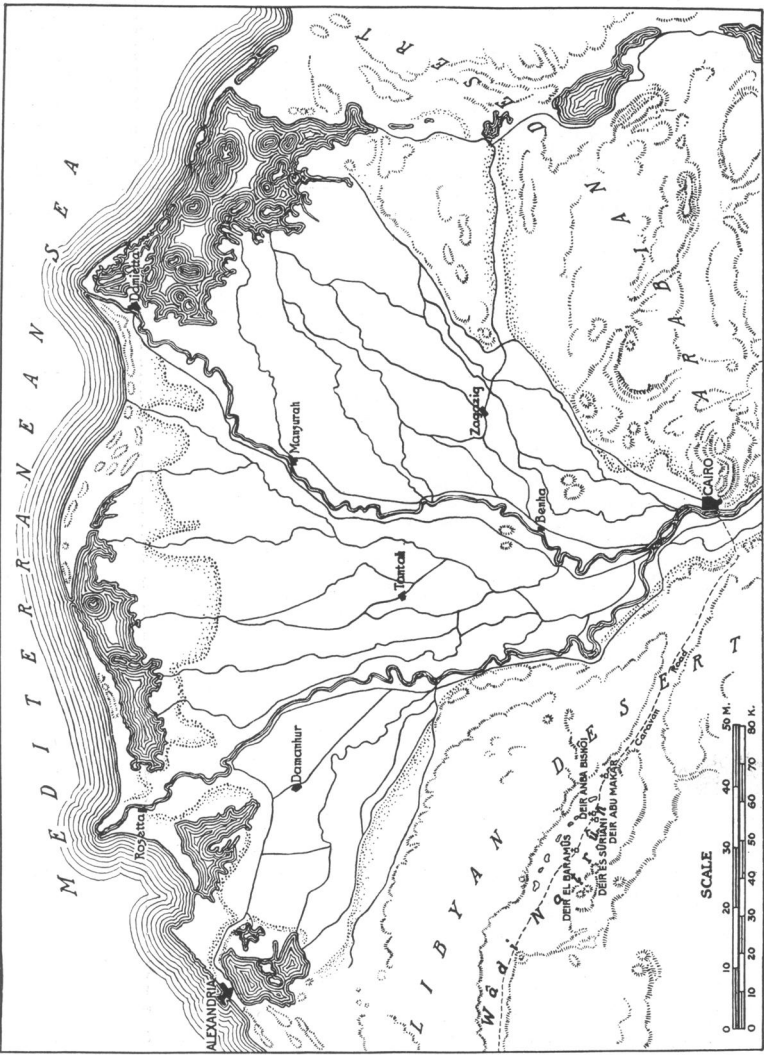
of this organization was at or near the existing Monastery of Baramus, and here the first church was built in the desert either in memory of the "Greek Princes" Maximus and Domitius, who died three years after joining Macarius, or by the Roman matron Melania for the priest Isidorus. Macarius himself retired once more for solitude to another part of the Wadi Natrun, and spent the remainder of his life upon a rock or eminence where another church was raised, overlooking a second settlement of disciples. Tradition, which there is good reason to accept in this case, asserts that two more communities and churches were built during the lifetime of Macarius by John the Dwarf and Pishoi (Bishâi), disciples of Amoi, an early follower of Macarius. Certain it is that before the end of the fourth century there were in Wadi Natrun four communities (the rudimentary forms of the four great Coptic Monasteries of Macarius, John the Dwarf, Pishoi, and Baramus), each with its church and presiding priest.

Nothing is known of these churches, of which probably no vestige now remains, for early in the fifth century the nomad tribes of the western desert fell upon the Wadi Natrun and ravaged it with fire and sword. It was on this occasion that the famous monk, Moses the Robber, received the crown of martyrdom. The raid was repeated in 434 and 444 A.D.; but before this latter date the monks had so far learned wisdom from experience as to have raised at least one tower of refuge, the "Tower of Piamoun." Here a number of them escaped from their natural foes, while forty-nine others exposed themselves to death and were known thenceforth as the Forty-Nine Martyrs of Shiêt. The incident is noteworthy, for this early tower of refuge is the direct ancestor of the *kasr* or keep of the mediaeval monasteries.

Some forty years later a regular provision was made for the support of the monks, and there are unmistakable indications that this was followed by a period of architectural activity, though its exact objects

<sup>1</sup>See BULLETIN of the Metropolitan Museum, February, 1911, and May, 1912.

<sup>2</sup>Gk. Scetis, Copt. Shiêt, Shihêt.



MAP OF THE DELTA OF EGYPT SHOWING THE POSITION OF THE WADI NATRUN  
AND ITS MONASTERIES

cannot be determined. More definite results were attained in the sixth century. A violent outbreak of the Julianist or Gai-anite Heresy caused the ejection of one party of monks from the "Churches and Towers" which now and for long after constituted the nucleus of a monastery. As a consequence, the minority were accom-



DRAWING OF SAINT PISHOI IN A SYRIAC  
MS. FROM THE WADI NATRUN NOW  
IN THE BRITISH MUSEUM

modated by their supporters in Egypt with duplicate churches and towers, thus originating the very important but almost unrecognized class of Theotokos Monasteries. Particular mention is made in this connection of a church built to the south of that of Saint Macarius by a Byzantine official, Aristomachus, and consecrated by the Patriarch Theodosius (about 535 A.D.). Byzantine fragments probably from

this or the preceding period are still to be seen in the Monastery of Saint Macarius.

In the latter part of the reign of Justinian (about 567 A.D.), the Byzantine government took the step of excluding from Alexandria all Monophysite prelates. There is every reason to attach great weight to the statement of a tenth-century author that, in consequence, the seat of the Monophysite patriarchate was transferred to the Monastery of Saint Macarius. This may account for the outburst of building recorded as having taken place in the "Four Monasteries" at the same period. But once more disaster supervened. The desert tribes again fell upon the monasteries and sacked them so completely that for many years they lay ruinous and desolate.<sup>1</sup>

With the Arab Conquest the Copts were freed from the incubus of Byzantine tyranny. Benjamin, the Monophysite patriarch, emerged from hiding, and, seconded by John the Hegumen of Shiêt, vigorously took in hand the restoration of the monasteries. The Monastery of Pishoi—and doubtless the other monasteries—were rebuilt, and at that of Saint Macarius the relics of the Forty-Nine were enshrined in the (repaired?) Church of Aristomachus. But more than this, a new Church of Saint Macarius was built in a more convenient site at the foot of the rock whereon the original church had stood. This church, which comprised a "dome" or sanctuary and a nave with columns and walls covered with paintings of saints, was dedicated by Benjamin himself.

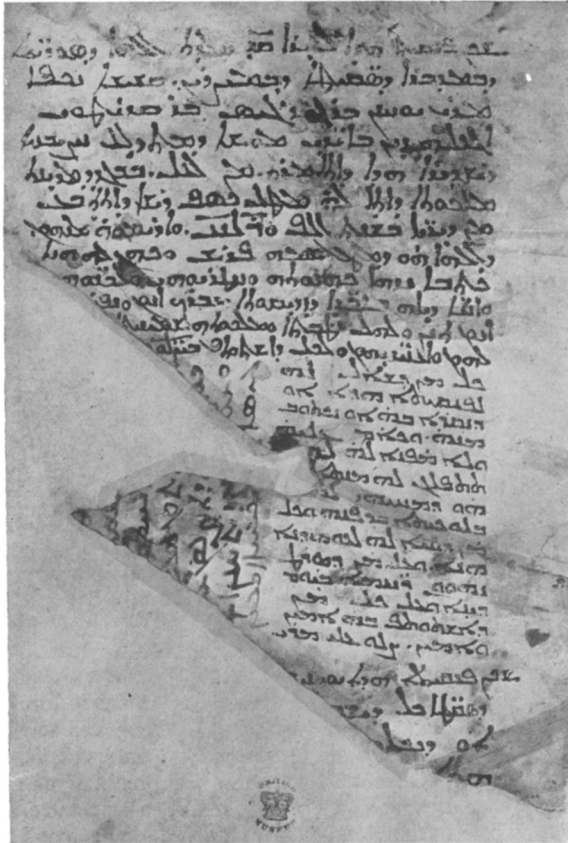
So far as we know, this period of restoration was followed by a pause of considerable length, and then (about 817) the monasteries were again sacked and their churches and cells burned. With admirable courage a monk James commenced a fresh period of restoration, encouraging and cheering the remaining monks for whom he built a sanctuary, dedicated to Saint Shenoute, to the south of that built by Benjamin. Nor was this all. After his elevation to the patriarchate, James

<sup>1</sup>The Church of Macarius mentioned during this period in the Life of Samuel may have been a ruined shell; or the reference may be anachronistic.

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restored the "Sanctuary of Benjamin" in a sumptuous manner, as well as the other ruined churches (i.e. those of the other monasteries). A third<sup>1</sup> sanctuary, dedicated to the Fathers and Disciples, was built to the north of the "sanctuary of Benjamin" by Shenoute, steward of the

founded. Two of these, indeed, named after Saint Moses and John Khamé, have perished; but the Monastery of the Syrians, in which an ancient community of Syrians were now established, still stands; and contemporary evidence shows that the church was built about 850 A. D.



NOTE IN A SYRIAC MS. BY MOSES OF NISIBIS STAT-  
ING THAT HE SECURED IMMUNITY FROM TAX-  
ATION FOR THE MONKS OF SCETIS

Monastery of Saint Macarius, and conse-  
crated in 847 A.D.

But this was not only a period of restor-  
ation: three new monasteries were now

<sup>1</sup>Three sanctuaries are also named in litur-  
gical MSS: the existing Church of St. Macarius  
is a mere fragment and now possesses only two  
sanctuaries, one partly or wholly demolished.

At this time, then, most of the churches  
assumed very nearly the form which they  
still bear. But each monastery as a whole  
showed a notable difference in other re-  
spects: near the church stood a "tower of  
refuge" and perhaps some other communal  
buildings, while around these lay the  
cells of the monks: as a group it was unin-

closed and defenseless, without the characteristic ramparts which distinguish it today. It was about 870 A.D. that the Patriarch Shenoute, after personal experience of the danger in which the monasteries lay from the desert nomads, surrounded the Monastery of Saint Macarius for the first time with a strongly fortified wall: there is no doubt that the other monasteries were similarly fenced at the same time.

There is no positive evidence of structural activity during the tenth century, but a good deal of internal embellishment

handsome sanctuary to the south of that of Benjamin," was built in honor of Saint Macarius at the cost of 3,000 dinars (about \$4,500)<sup>1</sup>. The eleventh and twelfth centuries, indeed, saw the monasteries at the height of their influence and power; and a great deal of decorative work and much in the way of fittings belongs to this age. It is noteworthy too that more than one monk of this period is referred to as "the Painter."

In the thirteenth century the eclipse of the monasteries decisively begins, and they are soon almost totally obscured from view;



MONASTERY OF ANBA PISHOI, CHURCH OF EL ADRA

seems to have been carried out. In particular, Abbot Moses of Nisibis—most astute of diplomats, who could persuade government to remit taxation!<sup>1</sup>—placed the highly important sanctuary and choir screens in the Church of the Syrian Monastery in 914 and 927 A.D. The splendidly carved screen-panels in other churches, also, are characteristic of the end of this or the beginning of the next century.

Early in the eleventh century (about 1005 A.D.), yet another church, "the

though we hear of restorations at Baramus in the thirteenth and at Pishoi in the early fourteenth century. When the shadow lifts in the first half of the fifteenth century, what a spectacle is revealed! In 1413 only a single monk remained in the Monastery of the Syrians, and Makrizi dismisses convent after convent as being in ruins or tenanted only by a handful of monks. The cause of this ruin is almost certainly to be found in the stringent economic conditions which in Egypt, as in Europe, followed the ravages of the Black Death in 1348-49.

Here, then, if we except recent and comparatively modern structures and al-

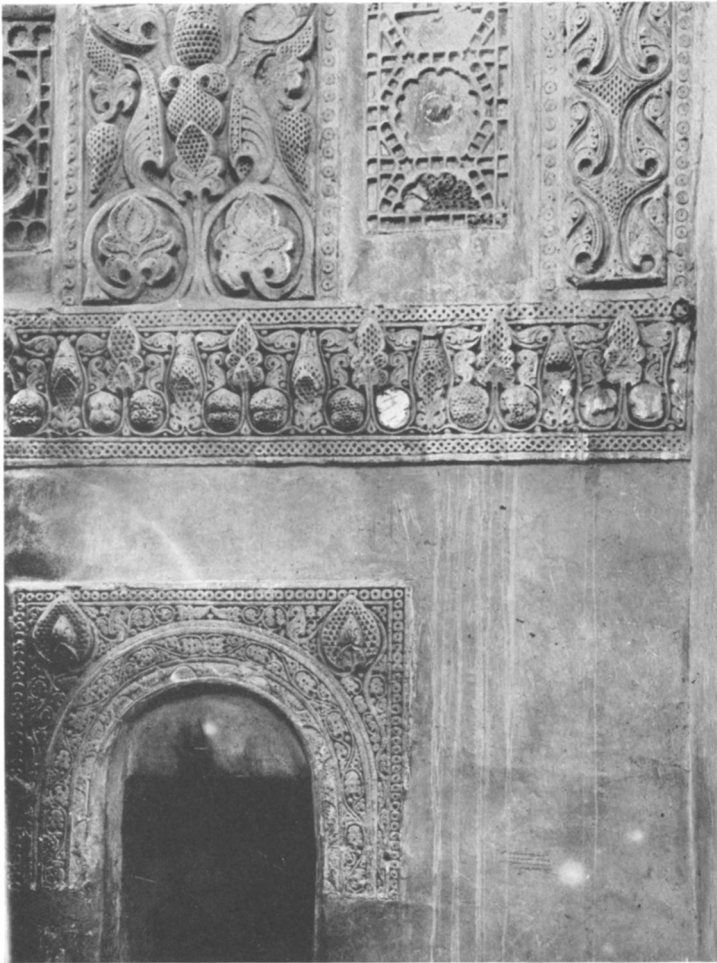
<sup>1</sup>An interesting note in a Syriac MS. from the Wadi Natrun by Moses of Nisibis, shown on page 37 through courtesy of the British Museum, states (1) that he went to Bagdad and secured for the monks of Scetis immunity from taxation exacted from them in 927 A.D. and (2) that he brought back 230 volumes for the library of his monastery.

<sup>1</sup>The effective value of 3,000 dinars would, of course, amount to many times this equivalent in the eleventh century.

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terations, the architectural history of these monasteries reaches its close.<sup>1</sup> Bald as the foregoing outline necessarily is, its very one-sidedness may serve to illustrate how inseparable are the architectural and

artistic strands from the main fabric of the history of the monasteries. It only remains to explain that it is still necessary by minute archaeological examination to ascertain, if possible, how much of the



PLASTERWORK IN THE HAIKAL OF THE CHURCH OF EL ADRA,  
MONASTERY OF THE SYRIANS

<sup>1</sup>Though activity ends in general with the fourteenth century, this does not necessarily apply to woodwork and similar detail. It should be noted here, moreover, that the Syrian Monastery was revived in the last quarter of the fifteenth century, and an Egyptian element admitted. There is reason to believe that the small Church of Es-Sitt Miriam in the Syrian

extant monuments can be referred to the various periods here summarily enumerated.  
H. G. EVELYN WHITE.

Monastery was then built to accommodate these intruders who could not, of course, share in services where Syrian was the language used.